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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether sex, empathy, or social skill is the better predictor of self-reported support behavior and perceptions. Research has shown that certain personality traits have a differential effect on the amount of support a person receives. Previous research has also show that females report receiving more support and needing more support than do males. Female (N=71) and male (N=54) college freshmen maintained the Rochester Interaction Record for 2 weeks, recording various types of support they received during their interactions. They then completed the Social Skills Inventory and the Empathy Scale. Results confirmed the findings of previous research for sex differences on the personality and support measures. Regression analyses showed that overall, sex was a better predictor of support than personality traits. Interestingly, the regressions also showed that emotional sensitivity was positively related to all the support indices for males, while personality was a poor predictor for female support indices. References are included. (Author/TE)

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Sex, Empathy, and Social Skills as Predictors of Social Support

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examined whether sex, empathy, or social skills is the better predictor of self-reported support behaviors and perceptions. Research has shown that certain personality traits discriminate amount of support received. Previous research has also shown that females report receiving more support and needing more support than do males. Subjects maintained the Rochester Interaction Record for two weeks recording various types of support they experienced during their interactions. They then completed the Social Skills Inventory and the Empathy Scale. Results confirmed the findings of previous research for sex differences on the personality and support measures. Regression analyses showed that overall, sex was a better predictor of support than personality traits. Interestingly, the regressions showed that emotional sensitivity was positively related to all the support indices for males, while personality was a poor predictor for female support indices.

SEX, EMPATHY, AND SOCIAL SKILLS AS PREDICTORS

OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

This paper reports preliminary analyses from a study conducted on social support, as it occurs in ongoing social interaction. Specifically, the focus of the present report is on the relationship between sex, personality, and social support. Research has shown that certain traits discriminate the amount of support received. For example, self-esteem, religiosity, and value for authority have been positively associated with support receipt (Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, and Lazarus, 1987). The trait that is most conceptually and empirically (e.g. Barnett, Howard, King, & Dino, 1981; Krebs, 1975; Schaller & Cialdini, 1988) linked with helping behavior is empathy, defined as the ability to role-play and thus vicariously experience the distress of another. Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) found that empathy was "a primary personality attribute for predicting helping behavior" being a better predictor than similarity to, or liking for, the person in need of help. One may also consider level of social skills to be a trait associated with support receipt. Sarason, Sarason, Hacker, and Basham (1985) reported that subjects' social skills, as assessed by their partners in a dyadic interaction, the experimenter, and themselves, were related to higher levels of social support receipt. Others have found that increases in social skills were positively related to increases in friendships and perceived support (Cohen, Sherrod, and Clark, 1986).

A principal trait that differentiates people on the dimension of supportive interaction is sex. Research shows that females receive (Butler, Giordano, & Neren, 1985; Stokes & Wilson, 1984) and need more support (Rosenthal, Gesten, & Schiffman, 1986) than do males. Other work suggests that females provide more support (e.g. Bernard, 1981; Fischer, 1982), perceive a greater need for support on the part of others (Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1985), and have less difficulty providing support (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983) than do males.

However, sex differences in supportive behaviors may be mediated by personality traits. Females have been shown to be more socially skilled than males (e.g. Riggio, 1986), and more empathetic (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983), and, as noted, these traits are linked to supportive behaviors. Thus, the research question posed here is whether sex, empathy, or social skills is the better predictor of support provision, difficulty of provision, and the perception of others' need for support, and whether social skill or sex is the better predictor of support receipt.

METHOD

Subjects.

Subjects were 71 female and 54 male freshmen Introductory Psychology students who participated for course credit.

Materials and Procedure.

Participants completed a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977) on which they recorded any social interaction they had lasting ten minutes or longer for a period of 14 days. Interaction was defined as any behavior in which two or more people are responding to one another, a conversation being a typical example (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Measures on the RIR included the extent to which the subject: received support, provided support, needed support, perceived a need for support on the part of others, and perceived difficulty with providing support. Support was defined as a feeling of being loved, accepted or cared about, or a feeling that one is valued, trusted, respected, or held in esteem (cf Cobb, 1976). The RIR is presented in Figure 1. See Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) for a full description of the instructions provided to subjects.

After two weeks, subjects returned to the laboratory to complete the Social Skills Inventory (SSI) and the Empathy scale. The SSI includes six sub-scales, each containing 15 items: Emotional Expressivity, Emotional Sensitivity, Emotional Control, Social Expressivity, Social Sensitivity, Social Control. Ratings were made on 9 point scales (1 = not at all true of me, 9 = very true of me). See Riggio & Throckmorton, (1986) and Riggio (1986) for psychometric properties. The Empathy scale is a 33 item measure (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). All items were rated on a 9 point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 9 = Agree strongly).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Rochester Interaction Record Analysis Package (RIRAP; Nezlek & Wheeler, 1984) was used to transform the data into summary indices. The variables created included overall averages for the various subjective measures on the RIR. Stepwise multiple regression analyses were performed for all subjects, and separately for females and males with the different support measures as the criterion and with sex of subject and the personality measures as predictors. Interactive terms were also entered as predictors (e.g., sex X empathy).

There were sex differences on the personality measures and the support measures. Females were more empathetic ($t(121)=6.00$, $p < .01$; females $M = 6.49$, males $M = 5.72$); emotionally expressive ($t(121)=1.98$, $p = .05$; females $M = 5.64$, males $M = 5.28$); emotionally sensitive ($t(121)=3.09$, $p < .01$; females $M = 6.52$, males $M = 5.99$); and socially sensitive ($t(121)=3.75$, $p < .01$; females $M = 6.45$, males $M = 5.69$) than were males. Males ($M = 5.29$) were more emotionally controlled than females ($M = 4.54$), $t(121)=4.28$, $p < .01$. There was no sex difference for social expressiveness (females $M = 5.97$, males $M = 5.87$) or social control (females $M = 5.65$, males $M = 6.01$).

Females received more support ($t(123)=2.70$, $p < .01$; females = 2.83, males = 2.35), provided more support ($t(123)=2.01$, $p < .05$; females = 2.69, males = 2.33), needed more support ($t(123)=3.28$, $p < .01$; females = 2.98, males = 2.37), and perceived a greater need for support among others, ($t(123)=2.87$, $p < .01$; females = 2.53, males = 2.07), than did males. There was no sex difference for difficulty of providing support.

The results for the overall regression analyses are presented in Table 1. The more emotional sensitive an individual was the more support they provided and received. Sex was also a predictor for the receipt of support; being female was associated with receiving support, needing support, and perceiving that need in others. The interaction between sex and emotional sensitivity was positively

associated with the difficulty of providing support. Overall then, of the traits examined, sex was the better predictor of self-reported supportive behavior.

When the regressions were performed separately for the sexes an interesting pattern emerged. The more emotionally expressive females were, the more support they reported receiving. The results of these analyses can be seen in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 3 emotional sensitivity was the only significant predictor of all the support measures for males. In each case the relationship between the criterion and the predictor was positive. Restriction of range did not appear to attenuate the relationships between the variables as differences between the sexes on the standard deviations for all measures were small.

A tentative conclusion here is that the emotional interactions of males are dependent on their emotional make-up, particularly their emotional sensitivity, with their social orientation playing a minor role. Thus personality is a significant predictor of male supportive behavior and perceptions. The emotional interactions of females, however, generally appear to depend on characteristics other than empathy and social skills. Either other personality traits account for female supportive behaviors and perceptions, or these behaviors and perceptions are due to situational influence, or, of course, an interaction between the two.

In conclusion, future research that includes sex as a factor is needed to examine personality traits as they relate to supportive behavior and perceptions. Given the importance of social support as a psychological variable (see Cohen & Wills, 1985, for a review of the relationship between social support and health), it is essential to conduct research on the factors that predict these behaviors and perceptions.

TABLE 1

Multiple Regression Analyses to Predict Support Measures

Criterion	Predictors	Beta	F-value	R	R2
Provide	Emotsens	.29	11.16**	.29	.08
Receive	Emotsens	.24	7.48**	.24	.06
	Sex	-.19	5.90**	.30	.09
Need	Sex	-.28	10.57**	.28	.08
Difficulty	Sexes	.18	4.07*	.18	.03
Other need	Sex	-.25	08.10**	.25	.06

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Emotsens = emotional sensitivity.
Sexes = sex X emotional sensitivity.

TABLE 2

Multiple Regression Analyses to Predict Support Measures: Females

Criterion	Predictors	Beta	F-value	R	R2
Provide	No significant predictors				
Receive	Emotexpr	.27	5.29*	.27	.07
Need	No significant predictors				
Difficulty	No significant predictors				
Other need	No significant predictors				

TABLE 3

Multiple Regression Analyses to Predict Support Measures: Males

Criterion	Predictors	Beta	F-value	R	R2
Provide	Emotsens	.40	9.68**	.40	.16
Receive	Emotsens	.31	5.19*	.31	.09
Need	Emotsens	.32	5.59*	.32	.10
Difficulty	Emotsens	.44	11.87**	.44	.19
Other need	Emotsens	.32	5.59*	.32	.10

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Emotsens = emotional sensitivity.
Emotexpr = emotional expressitivity.

FIGURE 1

ROCHESTER INTERACTION RECORD (RIR)

Date: _____ Day: ____ Time: _____ am ___ Length: _____ hrs _____ mins
pm ___

Initials: _____ _____ _____ If more than 3 others: # of females ___

Sex: _____ _____ _____ # of males _____

Support needed or desired:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Support received:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Intimacy:	not at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very intimate
Quality:	unpleasant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very pleasant
Support provided:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Difficulty:	very easy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very difficult
Support other needed/desired:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot

Nature: Work/Study Socializing Relaxing Life necessity Other

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